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ABSTRACT

Leading academic feminists charge that the traditional college curriculum promotes sexism and social injustice, and that Western culture is a flawed concept from the start because all that it has recorded for succeeding generations has been dominated by a male bias. This "gender feminism," in contrast to "equity feminism," aims to transform understanding of the past, present, and future by gaining acceptance of the notion that the sex/gender system is the most important aspect of human relations. Gender feminists share an ideal of a genderless culture and reject family, marriage, and maternal responsibility for child-rearing. Gender feminists insist that they speak for all women, but the average woman has no wish to wage a war on gender. Such feminist teachings exact a human and academic cost, as all knowledge becomes subordinate to "making sense of women's social experience." Gender feminism is not the product of reasoned scholarship; it is doctrinal and political, and without grassroots support. Debates over traditional college curriculum are a good place to begin to challenge gender feminism. (JDD)

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"Feminism and the College Curriculum"

Christina Hoff Sommers, Associate Professor of Philosophy, Clark University

Editors' Preview: *In the last 30 years, the academy has become increasingly politicized, as Prof. Christina Hoff Sommers points out in this issue. The overemphasis on questions of race, class and gender are threatening to obscure larger truths which, in the words of last month's* Imprimis *author Lynne V. Cheney, speak to all people in all places at all times. Professor Sommers further charges that radical feminists' role in transforming the college curriculum is only a prelude to abandoning all gender distinctions.*

There are two basic assumptions behind the move in the last twenty or more years to "reform" the traditional college curriculum. The first is that an oppressive elite has dominated Western history and culture, and determined the curriculum of higher learning. The second assumption is that one way of liberating the oppressed is to change the content of that curriculum which tells the story of Western development through history, literature, philosophy, art and science. Now both of these assumptions are emotionally charged, and their juxtaposition in the realm of modern education is even more incendiary. How is it that such a fusty and reputedly "dry" subject as the curriculum has become the center of so much controversy? Is there any truth to the charge that the traditional curriculm promotes sexism and social injustice? Is modern higher education in America "oppressive," "undemocratic," "masculinist," and in need of radical reform? These are charges being directed against the academy by leading academic feminists.

Alleged Victims and Victimizers

The feminists tell us that we cannot content ourselves with seeking the answers to these questions from the administrators and teachers of the traditional curriculum, for it is they who stand accused. Our attention should be reserved for the "victims," the women, and the ethnic and racial minorities that have been alternately victimized and neglected by a white, male elite. There are many self-appointed spokespersons for these alleged victims, but no group has been more vocal or more active than feminist scholars in higher education.

Feminist complaints against the traditional curriculum are based on the notion that Western culture–all the received knowledge of thousands of years–is a flawed concept from the start. For everything that has been recorded and passed on to succeeding generations has been dominated by a male bias. This means that not only the humanities are under attack. One of the busiest areas of feminist research today is the gender critique of the sciences.

My interest in feminism came about through my own experience in higher education. I teach moral philosophy at Massachusett's Clark University, and many of my courses have been routinely cross-listed with the women's studies department. In addition, one of my articles on family ethics was recently included in a feminist reader. So when my department chair asked me if I wanted to teach a course on feminism and philosophy, I was mildly interested. I sent away for some texts with titles like *Women and Philosophy: Towards the Theory of Liberation*, and *Beyond Domination: New Perspectives on Women and Philosophy*.

Before reading carefully in the area of feminist philosophy, I had assumed that there would be much I would agree with; after all, it is true that for most of human history men have had a dominant influence–and in consequence it is also true that our intellectual heritage has been largely a male achievement. To me, it certainly seemed like a good idea for women to seek greater opportunities to compete in the marketplace of ideas and to celebrate the often unremarked contributions women have made in the past. But I was soon to learn that my understanding of feminism was far too simplistic. The old and honorable goal of equality of opportunity had been superseded. Someone like me who still thought in terms of simple equity was, if not a dinosaur, at the very least mired in the most primitive stage of "feminist consciousness."

The New "Gender Feminism"

The new feminism, I was to discover from my reading, is not primarily concerned with more opportunities for women, or, for that matter, with including women's achievements in the curriculum. Its aim is to transform our understanding of our past, our present and our future. How? By convincing people to accept the central insight of contemporary feminist philosophy: that the sex/gender system is the most important aspect of human relations. The influential feminist philosopher Sandra Harding sums up this discovery:

> It is a system of male-dominance made possible by men's control of women's productive and reproductive labor, where "reproduction" is broadly construed to include sexuality, family life, and kinship formations as well as the birthing which biologically reproduces the species. [The sex/gender system] appears to be a fundamental variable, organizing social life throughout most recorded history and in every culture today.

Another feminist, Virginia Held, adds, "Now that the sex/gender system has become visible to us, we can see it everywhere."

I read on and found that leading feminist philosophers adopt this perspective. I've dubbed them "gender feminists" to distinguish them from the "common sense," moderate, or "equity" feminist. There is no doubt that gender feminists are in the majority. One finds them in all women's studies and many other departments at American universities. They typically share an ideal of a genderless culture that inspires their rejection of such entrenched social arrangements as the family, marriage and maternal responsibility for child-rearing. They also call not only for a radical re-ordering of society but an epistemological revolution, i.e., a revolution in knowledge itself, which would extirpate masculine bias, replacing the "male-centered curriculum" with a new curriculum inspired by a radical feminist perspective.

Christina Hoff Sommers is an associate professor of philosophy at Clark University in Massachusetts. She is the editor of *Virtue and Vice in Everyday Life: Introductory Readings in Ethics* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, second printing, 1989), and *Right and Wrong: Basic Readings in Ethics* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985). She lectures widely on ethics and has appeared on "The Phil Donahue Show," NBC's "Strictly Business," and the CBN cable network. Her articles have also been featured in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, the *American Scholar*, the *Partisan Review*, and numerous other publications.

The Feminist Attack on the Family

I would like to offer a few more samples of gender feminist philosophy which I came across in my reading. They are going to sound outrageous, and some may think that I deliberately searched for examples which are unflattering to feminists or which exaggerate their position. But, as a matter of fact, I did not have to look very hard to find them. One can open up any textbook on women's studies and find examples like these.

The first is from Alison Jaggar, the women's studies chair at the University of Cincinnati who also heads the American Philosophical Association's Committee on the Status of Women. She claims that the family is "a cornerstone of oppression" that "enforces heterosexuality" and "imposes the prevailing masculine and feminine character structures on the next generation." Lauding the day when the miracle of science will allow us to alter basic human functions like insemination, lactation and gestation, she says, "one woman could inseminate another. . . men and nonparturitive women could lactate . . . fertilized ova could be transferred into women's or even men's bodies."

Gender feminist literature is replete with proposals for abolishing marriage and the family in favor of various forms of androgeny or bisexuality. Richard Wasserstrom, former president of the Western American Philosophical Association, has argued that all differences between the sexes are arbitrary and irrelevant. He concludes that "in a truly just society," you would no more notice the sex of a person with whom you were romantically involved than you would notice eye color. He recommends bisexuality as the ideal romantic relationship because heterosexuality or even homosexuality is a reflection of prejudice and bigotry. Many gender feminists claim that we are all born bisexual, and that it is only because societies impose certain expectations upon us that we learn to act out conventional sex roles.

Naturally, many of the rank-and-file in the feminist movement are disturbed by such overt hostility toward the family and such radical claims about the nature of human sexuality. But their leaders are constantly pushing a harder line. They take pride in Sandra Harding's boast that gender feminists are "calling for a more radical intellectual, moral, social, and political revolution than the founders of modern Western cultures could have imagined."

War has been declared, not on inequality but upon gender. But the average woman has no wish to wage a war on gender. While she has been generally receptive to moderate feminism's claims for greater equality of opportunity, expanded civil and legal rights, and so forth, she is not ready to reject marriage, family and motherhood or the other institutions which the gender feminists tell her she should not want and which will only end up making her another victim. She is backed up by Sylvia Hewlett, an economist who after canvassing for the Equal Rights Amendment came to acknowledge that the failure of this proposed legislation was really a failure of gender feminism:

> It is sobering to realize that the ERA was defeated not by Barry Goldwater, Jerry Falwell, or any combination of male chauvinist pigs, but by women who were alienated from a feminist movement, the values of which seemed elitist and disconnected from the lives of ordinary people. Worst of all, many women suspected feminists of being contemptuous of their values and aspirations–which centered on family life.

Yet gender feminists continue to insist that they speak for all women, even as they complain about the apathy of their supposed constituency.

> "Because the wider program of eliminating gender cannot be achieved without reeducation, the gender feminist's highest priority is getting rid of the traditional curriculum and ensuring that feminists and their views occupy a prominent place in every college and university."

Gender Feminism in the Academy

Feminist conferences usually register serious concern that few women seem interested in becoming radical feminists. The answer to declining collegiate enrollment in women's studies has been to make courses in feminist consciousness mandatory, and/or to state, as many college catalogues do, that nearly every course in the curriculum will include some sort of feminist perspective.

Because the wider program of eliminating gender cannot be achieved without reeducation, the gender feminist's highest priority is getting rid of the traditional curriculum and ensuring that feminists and their views occupy a prominent place in every college and university.

Here are a few samples from the current course offerings on today's college campus:

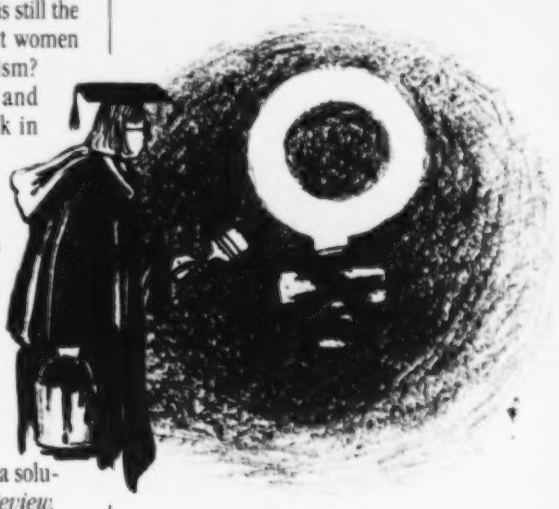
"Baroque Art and Gender Roles" (Williams College)
"20th-Century Lesbian Novels" (University of Nebraska)
"Heterosexism and the Oppression of Women" (University of New Mexico)
"The Lesbian in Literature: Honors Tutorial" (Queens College, CUNY)
"The Body: Gender, Symbol and Society" (Yale University)

There are many more specialized feminist courses like this as well as more general studies in "Women Poets," etc. But there is still the nagging question: what to do about women who don't buy into gender feminism? Well, for academics like Hewlett and myself, there is the counterattack in professional journals. We are branded as part of a reactionary "post-feminist back-lash."

The average woman poses a much harder problem. If she is already beyond college age, it is likely that the feminists won't even have an opportunity to lecture to her about her benighted family values. However, Simone de Beauvoir, the acknowledged founder of modern feminist philosophy, has offered a solution. In a 1975 issue of *Saturday Review*, she declared:

> No woman should be authorized to stay at home and raise her children. . . . Women should not have the choice, precisely because if there is such a choice, too many women will make that one.

She is silent about the kind of society in which a woman, "for her own good," would not be authorized to lead her own life. Gender feminists may not all be as authoritarian as de Beauvoir, but they are no less condescending. One feminist who is concerned about how her advocacy of androgeny will, as she puts it, "play in Peoria," recommends that feminists talk to average women "in a language they will understand." Another finds this too much



of a concession and says feminists ought to "speak to them in a language they will come to understand . . . . Let us cure conceptual disease by methods which are abrupt, but in the end more humane."

The Costs of Gender Feminism

Feminist teachings exact a human cost. The student who has had her consciousness "raised" in the classroom may feel intolerably oppressed by living within the "patriarchal" family and thus may also be burdened with a harmful personal philosophy. She may choose on ideological grounds not to marry and later find herself betrayed by that ideology. Or if she does

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marry, she may find it necessary to dissolve the family, no matter what the consquences for her spouse, herself, or her children. When "the personal is political," human relationships become fragile.

There are academic costs too. In the eyes of the feminist philosopher, education and knowledge ought to be liberated from gender distinctions, so the strategy is to condemn the humanities, the arts and the sciences as "masculinist" to the core. Students are taught that Shakespeare's plays are really about the suppression of women's rights, that Descartes's analytical philosophy is androcentric, that Newton's Law of Mechanics and Einstein's relativity theory are gender-laden. Regarding the latter, Sandra Harding says that the only remedy is "to reinvent science and theorizing itself to make sense of women's social experience."

Gender feminists believe that they have initiated an intellectual revolution of historic proportions. "What we are doing," says feminist Barbara Minnich, "is comparable to Copernicus shattering our geo-centricity, Darwin shattering our species-centricity. We are shattering androcentricity, and the change is as fundamental, as dangerous, as exciting." In the same vein, Alison Jaggar reports that "we are developing a whole reconstruction of the world from the perspective of women with the key word being 'women-centeredness'."

Now the assertion that there is such a thing as "the perspective of women" is as suspect as the idea of "Aryan science." Harding, Jaggar and the others are also wrong to presume that all of world history can be regarded as a mere footnote to feminism. The gender feminists haven't initiated an intellectual revolution; they have simply committed aggravated assault on scientific and intellectual standards. The resulting damage to the college curriculum is incalculable. All knowledge becomes subordinate to "making sense of women's social experience." And the obsessive concern with gender diminishes the true value of responsible feminist scholarship. If the gender feminists succeed in purging the traditional curriculum of its supposed masculine bias, the value of higher learning in America will be profoundly diminished.

"The gender feminists haven't initiated an intellectual revolution; they have simply committed aggravated assault on scientific and intellectual standards."

For Whom Do the Feminists Speak?

Let us ask again, for whom do the feminists speak? It might be said that as academics they need speak for no one but themselves. But that would be to mistake their mission: "Feminist academics," says Jaggar, "are the intellectual arm of the Women's Movement. If not, we have betrayed our trust." But who has entrusted these feminist spokespersons with their mission? Not the women of "Peoria," who, as we have seen, do not support the gender feminist agenda. Not the moderate feminists who may teach history, literature, philosophy, the arts and sciences with the goal of equality in mind, but who reject simple "victim-victimizer" formulas and premises like "the perspective of women." We must conclude, therefore, that the gender feminists speak for no one but themselves.

Sadly, there has been little resistance to gender feminism's attack on the curriculum. Bewildered or resentful students are loathe to criticize their teachers. Academic faculty women of a more modest feminist persuasion are understandably reluctant to challenge their colleagues and risk their own reputations. As for the male faculty, they ran for cover long ago. Yet gender feminism is not, as we have seen, the product of reasoned scholarship. It is doctrinal and political, and without grassroots support. And it is high time to challenge it in and outside of the classroom. The current debate over the traditional curriculum offers us a good place to start. ♟

Portions of this essay have appeared in Public Affairs Quarterly *(July 1988) and the* Chronicle of Higher Education *(September 1989).*

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